

Playwright Julia Cho Tackles Linguist's Unraveling Marriage in "The Language Archive"

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Photo caption: Playwright Julia Cho presents "The Language Archive" at Seattle Public Theater from May 16 through June 9.

Language is a living practice and it emerges from those who speak it. If the speaking ceases, language can die.

And if two speakers alter their speaking in two diverging directions, they may cease to be able to communicate. These are the heady issues explored in Julia Cho's play "The Language Archive" at Seattle Public Theater at the Bathhouse.

Cho reports that she conceptualized the play out of disparate fragments of curiosity and imagination.

"It started with a review of a recent (or at least it was then) book on vanishing languages," Cho says. "I did more reading and came across quite a few news articles about someone dying who's the last speaker of a language."

In a playwright's mind, though, the dramatic is never far away.

"At the same time, I had this fragment of a play about a man and woman arguing and the woman discovering in the course of the argument that she was going to leave her husband," Cho says. "I thought perhaps this man was a linguist, and that's kind of how the play began."

New York's Roundabout Theatre Company commissioned the play, and Cho worked closely with the theater to develop it for its premiere at South Coast Repertory. "I was very involved with the first production, and continued to be so as that production moved to Roundabout Theatre," she says. "I worked with the director Mark Brokaw and a wonderful cast."

Cho continued to participate in several subsequent productions, including at Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

"I also hung around for Jessica Kubzansky's production at East West Players, where we had an all-Asian cast, which was enormously satisfying," Cho says.

A bit of a perfectionist, Cho often felt that she wanted to improve the work. "I think just after the play was first done, I was still very hard on myself for what I perceived as its flaws and shortcomings," she says. "Over time, I find that I just accept the play for what it is and appreciate that it's probably the most approachable and producible of all my plays."

Cho has now stepped back from participating in new productions of the play. "I felt my contribution to any rehearsal process had run out," she says. "It gives me a lot of joy that the play is making the rounds and that new people are finding their way into the play and imbuing it with new life."

But she still remains keenly interested in the challenges of language.

"I find that the older I get, I speak to fewer people and I try to say less," she says. "I am always painfully aware when I speak that the other person may or may not be hearing what I'm trying to say."

She adds: "We are locked in our own narratives and it's very difficult to step out of your own story and realize (that) one, it's a story, and two, there might be a different story. The trick is to feel that way and yet still keep writing."

"The Language Archive" runs May 16 to June 9 at Seattle Public Theater, 7312 W. Greenlake Drive, Seattle. More information: www.seattlepublictheater.org/events-language.html.